

The Pope's Trip to the US. Curiosity and Expectations

Maria Rita Latto (April 14, 2008)



Pope Benedict XVI will be in the United States from the 15th to the 21st of April. The trip is creating a lot of curiosity and expectations, during which the Pontiff will also celebrate his 81st birthday on April 16.

Joseph Ratzinger, who became Pope in 2005, is the third Pontiff to visit the United States; Paul VI came to New York in 1965 and John Paul II was in the United States seven times. The latter, a



frequent traveller, visited the country as much as possible: during his first trip in 1979, for example, he visited seven cities in seven days, and gave 63 speeches. Joseph Ratzinger is also going to visit for seven days, even though he will be in just two cities, Washington and New York, and there will be "only" eleven scheduled speeches.

Through the years, before he was pontiff, Ratzinger created a personal reputation of being a hard man: strictly following the doctrine, opposing homosexuality and abortion, and considering Catholicism as the only true faith. Besides this strong side under the religious point of view, Benedict XVI's manner is mild and humble, expressing his brilliant ideas in a soft voice, with a strong German accent in each of the ten languages he speaks.

Archbishop Pietro Sambi, Apostolic Nuncio to the United States, said that he hopes the message U.S. Catholics get from the papal visit is "one of the things that the Pope pronounced the first day after being elected pope: Don't be afraid. Jesus Christ takes away nothing from you, but he will enrich you." Pope Benedict will visit Washington on April 15-17 and New York on April 18-20 and, apart from the meeting with President George W. Bush and a major U.N. address on April 18, the papal trip is defined by Archbishop Sambi first and foremost as "a pastoral journey." The Pontiff "comes to strengthen the faith, the hope, and love of the Catholic Church in the United States," the Archbishop said, adding that he hopes the Pope's visit will "bring a new wind of Pentecost ... a new springtime" to the U.S. church. Pope Benedict also "will bring his friendship and his holy word to all the people of the United States." Being that the visit coincides with a decisive moment in the American electoral campaign, Archbishop Sambi stated that those who think the Pope will have a message for Catholic voters should remember "the Pope is not a political but a religious leader," and that "to America he will bring the voice and the love of Jesus Christ. If there is something that is an exclusive prerogative of the Americans," concluded the Nuncio, "it is the choice of their leaders. And foreigners should not interfere." To the journalists who asked about the diplomatic relations between the Vatican and the U.S. after the Church's criticism of Bush's decision to go to war in Iraq, the Vatican Nuncio replied that "the deep conviction of the Holy See is that war must be always the last option. All other options have to be tried before starting a war. A war is always a sign of human failure in reaching an agreement. Peace is not a defeat for anybody but is a victory for the future."

The American media is focusing on this visit: [Time](#) [2] [magazine's cover of the April 14](#) [2] issue depicts Benedict XVI and the column inside by David Van Biema and Jeff Israely states that there is a great affinity between the Pope and the United States. In fact, according to the two columnists, there is a link between the theology and the public role of religion by Ratzinger and the history of the United States since the founding fathers. Tocqueville, in fact, had shown that the origins of the United States are based on the religious principles of the Pilgrim Fathers, and there is a "much clearer and implicit sense" in the U.S. than in Europe of a morality "bequeathed by Christianity." The columnists for Time attempted to survey the 80-year-old Pontiff's writings over the decades and testimonies from those who know him and conclude that "Benedict has a soft spot for Americans and finds considerable value in his U.S. Church, the third largest Catholic congregation in the world."

In the [Washington Post issue of April 13](#) [3], Michelle Boorstein notices a period of crisis in the



American Catholic community that is in dramatic demographic flux. The visit of the Pope shows, according to Boorstein, the importance of the American Church to the Vatican: "at 80, Benedict travels infrequently; this is only his eighth foreign trip in three years as Pope. And American Catholics make up just 6 percent of the world church, a percentage that's shrinking as the number of Catholics in Africa and Asia boom. But culturally and financially, Americans loom super-sized. For those reasons and others," continues the columnist, "Benedict experts say he views the United States as an essential battleground in what he considers the war of today's era: proving that modernity doesn't have to stamp out religious faith." A large part of American Catholics disagree with many Vatican issues and are "essentially developing their own, individualized religion, in tension with the hierarchy, but vibrant and spiritual." It is, according to the Washington Post, a sort of "faithful dissent." There is also the important issue of sex abuse: some critics believe that the dialogue in the Church has been severely limited by alleged cover-ups of clergy sex abuse. "The scandal," states Boorstein, "has seriously scarred U.S. Catholicism, left thousands of victims emotionally wounded, bankrupted six dioceses and resulted in more than \$2 billion in payouts to victims. Many Catholics -- and ex-Catholics -- cite failed church leadership in the scandal as a cause of lost faith. Top Vatican officials say Benedict will address the crisis, and possibly meet victims while he's in the United States, but many advocates are angry that he hasn't been more direct and that he left Boston -- the center of the crisis -- off his itinerary." The Washington Post also reports the opinion of some Vatican observers saying that the view from Rome of U.S. Catholics has improved in recent decades and among them there is John Allen, Vatican journalist, referring to church officials who decades ago viewed the United States as a "sort of a cowboy culture with a certain recklessness" with an independent-minded Catholic Church, while recently there is a "real fondness and appreciation for what they see as the religious health of American culture in comparison with contemporary Europe." It appears clear, though, that as the U.S. Church is changing, that "Latinos will lead it in new directions, including geographically."

[In the New York Times issue of April 13](#) [4] Ian Fisher and Laurie Goodstein state that the speech of the Pope at the United Nations on Friday, April 18 "is the centerpiece of the visit, and he is expected to speak out strongly on the importance of human rights and, possibly, to urge the world not to use only the military in solving security problems." Other important moments of the trip are the visit to the White House and to Ground Zero in Manhattan, where Benedict XVI will meet with other Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and Muslims — "a group," according to Fisher and Goodstein, "he has had specific troubles with since he quoted two years ago a medieval Byzantine emperor who called aspects of Islam 'evil and inhuman.'"

It is probably true, as stated by the Nuncio in the United States, that the Pope's visit has mainly a pastoral focus. Though, it is clear that there are deep implications, and that the expectations around this trip, and in particular the Pontiff's speeches, are absolutely justified because of the involvement of important politics issues.No



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